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Implicit Premises

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1. Introduction

The informal logician, analyzing an argument in natural language, senses an insufficiency or incompleteness of evidence advanced in support of the conclusion. Unable to proceed without estimating the importance of the lacuna, she scrutinizes the argument in its context - who advanced it when as part of what debate - to identify more precisely what is lacking. Finding this, she may then evaluate the argument as weak (the evidence falls seriously short) or strong (nothing vital missing) and go to the next item on her agenda.

Our interest here is in those cases where the deficiency can be remedied by formulating what was missing as a premise and fitting it into its place in the argument. The justification for this step could be that the author assumed the reader would know it as part of general or common knowledge, and that the missing premise probably lay within the author's intent. Let us for now call the statement she has added to the explicit premises an *implicit premise*: it alone will be the focus of the following investigation. But before pursuing it we note that supplying an implicit premise does not itself complete the work of the argument analyst. She must still evaluate the now repaired argument as weak or strong.

Some important problems of implicit premises (e.g. how to find them, and how to formulate them) will be touched on only in passing (the former) or not at all (the latter). The problem addressed here is the terminology used to describe them, chiefly but not only *implicit premises*. This terminology is important because it varies considerably from one writer to the next (and even in the same writer), it has been little studied, and it may well influence our thinking about its referent. In particular I will focus on problems associated with the term *implicit* as descriptive of premises in the work of argument analysts, a usage in concluding I advise against. But I begin with a look at other descriptive terms.

2. Variety of Terms

A striking feature of the considerable literature on the implicit premise is the wealth of terminology employed to refer to it. *Implicit premise* is found in some teaching material (Dowden 1993: 252f.) as well as in investigations of assumptions ((Delin et al. 1994; Plumer 1999). *Unstated premise* is found both in research (Burke 1985) and in textbooks (Copi & Burgess-Jackson 1996: 29). The Amsterdam School of Argumentation prefers *unexpressed premises* (Eemeren & Grootendorst 1982/83; Snoeck-Henkemans 1992: 28f.; Gerritsen 1991), although others use this term too (Yanal 1998: 235ff.), and the Amsterdam School occasionally opts for *tacit premise* (Eemeren & Grootendorst 1982/83), or along with other writers, *suppressed premise* (Freeman 1988; Eemeren & Grootendorst 1982/83; Fogelin 1991: 89).

Missing premise is widely used (Copi & Burgess-Jackson 1996: 29; Walton 1996: 105), even by a writer who somewhat improbably advances an other-world semantics scheme to aid us in finding it (Donn 1990). Hitchcock (1983: 94) refers to the elusive premise as *omitted* as well as *missing*, and notes a problem common to much of this terminology: "in saying that an

argument has a missing (or unexpressed, or tacit, or unstated, or suppressed) premiss, we seem to be saying that an argument has a premiss which it does not have." Gough and Tindale (1985: 100) prefer *hidden premise*, which at least suggests that the concealed premise is there, terminology also favored by Grennan (1994) and Groarke (1997). Finally, some empirical work suggests that students more readily identify implicit major premises in syllogisms and premises in non-syllogistic arguments than they do minor premises in syllogisms (Eemeren et al. 1994).

It isn't clear that unexpressed premise marks off some distinction not available to the Amsterdam School with other terminology. Hitchcock (1985), and Gough and Tindale (1985) would reserve *missing premise* for the shortcoming of an enthymeme (incomplete syllogism), and *hidden premise* for the case of interest to informal logic. But other than this the wealth of vocabulary seems not to mark off distinctions helpful for understanding and communicating the function of the implicit premise in argument analysis in informal logic.

Informal logicians confront a wide variety of argument in natural language toward the understanding of which formal logic has contributed comparatively little, and their working vocabulary is much influenced by the dominance of formal logic in the 20th century. As a result, interpretations and adjustments are necessary to secure a terminology adequate to the task of argument analysis. *Implicit* (about which more below) does not appear to denote a relation in either logic, but the burden of explaining why it doesn't and what it nonetheless does denote presses more on the informal logician. She is more occupied with arguments of substance in natural language, where the arguers feel little responsibility to render all of their important premise material explicit.

The descriptive phrase *implicit premise* would not be trouble free even if we had either an entirely satisfactory clarification of *implicit* or a substitute that would banish the problems. This is because *premise* means something quite different in formal and in informal logic. In formal logic, *premise* denotes a statement that must be true for the conclusion to be true. Should this statement turn out not to be needed for the conclusion to be true, then it is not a premise. For the informal logician, *premise* denotes a statement advanced in support of a conclusion, but one whose falsity can be compatible with the truth of the conclusion.

Such different understandings enhance the potential for miscommunication between formal and informal logician. For example, formal logicians balk at recognizing convergent arguments as arguments - in this type of argument each premise contributes a measure of separate, independent support, so it is possible for a conclusion to receive strong support from one or more independent premises even when some other premise turns out to be false or irrelevant. Its being advanced by someone in support of a conclusion makes a statement a premise for informal logic; its being needed for a conclusion to be true makes one a premise for formal.

3. *Implicit Statements and Implications*

Though *imply* and *implicit* both descend from Latin *implicare*, current use has them some distance from their ancestor. When Aeneas rhetorically inquires of the Latins *quaenam vos fortuna implicuit bello* (Bk. XI, 108f.), what fate involved or entangled them in war, the ancient meaning is closer to today's *implicate*. For us it is clear that to be implicit is to be the opposite of explicit. From this it follows that to be an implication and to be implicit must differ. For an implication can be explicit, and it does not seem possible for something to be both implicit and the opposite of implicit at the same time.

Let us explore this distinction briefly. When someone says in a menacing tone of voice "I wouldn't do that if I were you," we might say that there is a threat implicit in this counterfactual. On the other hand, when the foreman says "Do that and you will be docked a day's wages," it is not appropriate to say that the threat is implicit. In this case the threat is explicit - the statement itself is a threat - and the threat will not be both implicit and explicit at the same time. To be implicit is to be unstated, whereas to be explicit is to be stated, and a threat will not be both stated and unstated simultaneously.

While a threat may be explicit or implicit, we do not describe an implication in similar terms. To my knowledge phrases such as *explicit implications* and *implicit implications* are not used. We do, however, speak of one implication as unstated, then of another as explicitly drawn by the writer. Of this pair the unstated implication presents us with an epistemic problem. Given that it is unstated, how do we know that it is there - that it even exists? If someone claimed there was a coin in a fountain, and we looked long and hard from various vantage points and didn't see it, we might conclude that there wasn't any coin there after all. Isn't the unstated implication analogous to the unseen coin - unperceived and hence not there?

To be an implication is to be implied, and in the sense in which a text might have an unstated implication, to be implied is to be made true by the text. This lands us in the province of logic, which is concerned with cases where the truth or falsity of some statements affects the truth or falsity of others (Beardsley 1975: 48). As the *Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy* defines it, implication is "a relation that holds between two statements when the truth of the first ensures the truth of the second" (1995: 362). This explains how an implication relates logically to other statements in the text. But it falls short of fully addressing our current problem: since our implication is unstated, how do we even know that it is there, let alone specifically what it is, and that as such it is an implication?

Logic does more than enable us to apprehend given statements and decide whether or not they stand in certain relations to each other. Given a text, the mind operating on it logically can generate new statements whose truth depends on those of the text, and these we call its implications. One can say that the new statements are deduced or drawn out of the text. This aspect is emphasized in the *Encyclopedia of Philosophy* definition of implication as "The relation that holds between two propositions when one is deducible from the other" (1967: V, 68). One can also say, with C.S. Peirce (1992: 111), that reasoning discloses "from the consideration of what we already know, something else which we do not know." The "something else" we just found out is the logical implication of "what we already know."

4. *Implicit Premises*

The problem with *implicit* as a modifier of *premise* when analyzing arguments is just this double duty it performs. It answers two different questions. First, why is this argument incomplete? There is a hidden, or unstated, or implicit premise. Second, how do we know what this unstated premise is? It is implied by the argument. The second question is where the trouble lies. At a minimum this response puts us at cross purposes with our analytical endeavor. Beyond that, it may not be the best description of the logical relation of the missing premise to the argument.

Little has been written on the stance or approach of the argument analyst to the argument she is analyzing. In the real world we analyze arguments when their conclusions are of

consequence to us and we must rely on these conclusions for our beliefs or actions. If we had complete faith or trust in the claims of others, there would be no need to ask for reasons or evidence, and consequently there would be no need for arguments. If all reasons or evidence supported the conclusions of arguments equally well, there would be no need to analyze and evaluate these arguments. So argument analysis in the real world is doubly sceptical: first in doubting claims and demanding reasons or evidence to support them; second, in analyzing the reasons or evidence to determine whether it adequately supports the claim. Further, the scepticism of the real-world argument analyst is measured: whether to analyze a given argument, and if so, how far to pursue the analysis, will depend on the degree to which the claims supported are important for our beliefs or actions.

This measured scepticism in the approach of the argument analyst is what is at cross purposes with the conception of the missing premise as implied by the argument. One task of analysis is to establish whether the explicit premises are reliable, or to simplify, whether they are true. We proceed on the hypothesis that they may be false until we establish them either true or false. Since the implicit premise isn't stated, we are able to identify it as a premise only by its relation to explicit premises and conclusion. We seem to recognize the missing statement as a premise only because it is implied by one or more true explicit premises. (If an explicit premise were false, neither it nor what it implied would support the conclusion.) So we simultaneously entertain the proposition that the explicit premises are established as true and the proposition that the explicit premises are not established as true. Simultaneously entertaining contradictory propositions is a situation even we informal logicians prefer to avoid.

This situation is aggravated if we hold that the implicit premise is implied by the conclusion of the argument and some combination of explicit premises. We need *a fortiori* to suspend judgment on the truth of the conclusion, since the point of argument analysis in the broad sense is to establish whether the conclusion receives adequate support from these premises. This position lands us squarely in begging the question of the circular reasoning variety. We are holding that the conclusion must be true to identify the missing premise, and that the missing premise must be true to support the conclusion.

5. Conclusion

If we continue to speak of *implicit premises* in argument analysis, we should do so aware of its equivocal nature, its tendency to pre-judge the logical relation of a missing premise to its argument, and its tendency to tangle our analytical endeavor in logical snares. Given a number of other terms to refer to the missing premise that lack this equivocation and the unfortunate tendencies, we may be better off not referring to *implicit* premises in argument analysis at all. These other terms do involve the paradox noted by Hitchcock, but it doesn't hamper our analytical endeavor. For when we say that an argument has a missing premise, we are indeed claiming that it has a premise it doesn't have. It has a premise (a statement needed for the conclusion to receive *prima facie* adequate support) it doesn't have (the statement is not present among the expressed premises).

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